

First Opinion: A Sunny Perspective on the Great Depression

Holm, Jennifer L. *Turtle in Paradise*. New York: Random House, 2010.

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Set in 1930s Key West, Jennifer L. Holm's Newbery Honor Book *Turtle in Paradise* adds to the list of award-winning historical fiction for children set in the Great Depression era, which includes such classics as *Roll of Thunder*, *Hear My Cry*; *Out of the Dust*; *Bud, Not Buddy*; and *Esperanza Rising*. *Turtle in Paradise* tells the story of an eleven-year-old, no-nonsense girl, named Turtle, who finds herself forced to spend the summer of 1935 living in Key West with relatives she's never met, after her mother takes a job as a housekeeper for a woman who doesn't like children. To pass time on the island, Turtle falls in with a group of boys, made up of her cousins and their friends, who operate a neighborhood babysitting business and call themselves the Diaper Gang. As she gets to know her cousins and various other members of the family, whom her mother had left before Turtle was born, Turtle learns to appreciate her relatives and find a sense of belonging in the community of Key West.

Narrated in first person by Turtle herself, the novel works hard to capture the voice of

a bright yet cynical child whose experiences with the school of hard knocks in the Great Depression have taught her more about the world than her naïve and flighty mother, Sadie Belle. As the daughter of a single mother, whose housekeeping jobs keep the family on the outskirts of society, Turtle has learned to expect the worst in everyone she meets, but she also displays a resilience and pluck that imbue Holm's narrative with freshness and spirit. Readers of all ages can find it amusing, like when Turtle candidly weighs in on various aspects of 1930s popular culture, including the comic strip character in *Little Orphan Annie* ("Folks like to feel sorry for orphans, but I think they've got it pretty good" (21)) and child film star Shirley Temple ("Everyone thinks she's the cutest thing ever. I can't stand her" (8)).

Turtle in Paradise is the third work of historical fiction by Holm to win the Newbery Honor Book award, following *Our Only May Amelia* and *Penny from Heaven*). Holm's success here reflects her mastery of a special approach to the genre. Like its predecessors, *Turtle in Paradise* takes its raw material from Holm's own family history. While *Our Only May Amelia* is based on the turn-of-the-century pioneer life of Holm's grandaunt and *Penny from Heaven* on the 1950s childhood of her mother, *Turtle in Paradise* was inspired by the experiences of Holm's great-grandmother's family, who emigrated to Florida from the Bahamas late in the nineteenth-century. Of these three novels, *Turtle in Paradise* is certainly the most light-hearted. Despite the bleakness of that particular period in American history, Holm's novel concentrates primarily on representing the sunny-side of life in Key West: food is plentiful, shoes are optional, and—for the Diaper Gang, anyway—business is booming. The story meanders through the Diaper Gang's various episodic adventures in babysitting and neighborhood pranks, often begging comparison to another early twentieth-century "gang," Hal Roach's *The Little Rascals*. The climax comes with a cockamamie scheme hatched by Turtle and the gang to find pirate treasure on an uninhabited island in the area. Despite unexpected misfortune and the menace of a deadly hurricane, the outcome is largely happy: Turtle and her cohorts succeed in finding the hidden pirate treasure and return from their island adventure unharmed. While Turtle's share is sadly stolen by her mother's smooth-talking, con artist boyfriend, Turtle and her mother quickly find a silver lining in the form of reconciliation and a home with their extended family in Key West.

Overall, Holm's work is to be praised for the charming balance it strikes between historical accuracy and a nostalgia that reflects her intimacy with these characters and events as favorites from her own family's stories. Holm succeeds in her efforts to capture the atmosphere of circa 1930s Key West, and she hones well the familiar theme of discovering and appreciating one's family members. There's a poignancy in particular to Holm's portrayal of Turtle's maternal grandmother, Nana Philly—a bitter, sickly old woman whose estrangement from Turtle's mother still haunts her—as well as to the kind fisherman whom Turtle knows only as Slow Poke and whom she eventually discovers to be

her biological father. And while Holm's insertion of literary legend and Key West resident "Papa" Ernest Hemingway into the novel feels a bit awkward and gratuitous, the "Author's Note" included at the end of the book offers information on the period that does much to contextualize and validate Holm's decisions in her representation of Key West in particular and Depression-era America in general.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Sonya Sawyer Fritz is an assistant professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas, where she teaches courses in literature for children and adolescents. She is currently working on a book project that examines the representations of place and space in nineteenth-century British literature for girls.